



FOURTEEN

Bill Yarrow

in memory of my parents

EYES OFF THE ROAD

One by one I lost my desires.
Dirty ambition left first.
Knowledge raged but then it cooled.
Riches never had the hook very deep.
Achievement uncoupled from success seemed pointless.
Friendship became recursive.
Appetite lost its urgency.
Form declined into artifice.
Love stopped feeding me so I stopped feeding it.
Insight evaporated when memory left.
Lust lingered longest.

My desires, gaily arrayed, bolted to a
lapis slab, await me in Heaven.
With any luck I'll go to Hell.

HITTING THE WALL

I hadn't seen her since Carter was President. Everything about her had turned white, even her beauty marks. I faced her strangeness and fumbled for the past. The time we went crabbing on the Chesapeake. Her imitation of Barbara Mandrell. Playing lawn darts at my Mom's. I tried to talk, but only whispers slithered out. She pretended to understand what I was saying, then said, "Wasn't it fungible to have run across each other?" Fungible? I questioned. She slapped me—hard. Then her perfume returned—with a vengeance.

BOGDAN

Dad was dying. Meanwhile, the blood from a puncture wound was drying on Bogdan's palm. He was a tenth grade messiah famous for acts of attrition.

I had solicited his help with a bully who had been threatening to beat me up for wearing a leather tie to school.

He said he'd see what he could do.

The next day, my tormentor was not in class. I went looking for my savior.

He was loitering by the cafeteria tray return, eyeing the cruelty in passersby.

I went up to him and asked for another favor. "You only get one." I pondered that.

LOVE AND HOW IT GETS THAT WAY

You were the most beautiful girl in third grade.
My thoughts were restless escapades. My heart
was roasted butter. I donned wax wings and flew
toward the highest sky I could find. And then,
among a score of others, to be invited to your party!
We all stood on the lawn behind your house, most
of us in wide-striped tees, one of us in a bowtie,
eyeing that thing in your backyard, that thing
you pumped to spin around, and we all took turns,
you on one side in a yellow dress and one after
the other of us on the other, and we spun you,
spun you! and then that kid in the bowtie got on, got
dizzy, and vomited, and you looked at him with disgust
and I felt like Adam's apple had just landed in my lap.

JOAN OF DARK

What happens in heaven stays in heaven.
“That’s not true,” she said to me. “You know
it’s not true.” Yes, the acts of paradise,
slippery like syrup, slide down the clouds
and drip onto the tops of the trees where
birds and squirrels reveal them to man.
“What color are the birds?” she asked. Pink.
The pink birds and checkerboard squirrels
reveal the sly doings of the chubby cherubs.
“What’s sly doings?” I meant “sky” doings.
Reveal the sky doings of half-pint angels.
“I love heaven, don’t you?” I’m not allowed to
tell. They will burn me at the stake if I tell.
“Like Joan of Dark?” Just like Joan of Dark.

STEVIE'S KNEES

They broke both of Stevie's knees.
Gambling debt. Just like in the movies.
Except in real life it's a little more
tearful, a little less marauding.
Aunt Pol didn't see it. She was diabetes
blind by then or dead. I don't remember.
The main thing is to avoid heartache,
but only the frozen know how to do
that. The arteries of time are running
out of blood. The lungs of love are caked
with soot. Stevie's skin was a peerless
jewel undervalued by the college
bourgeois. I've read about the algebra
of need. Stevie's need was arithmetic.

GEORGE

Skinny guy with glasses sent to Vietnam,
comes back with an understanding of heroin,
an acquaintance with whorishness, a clarified
wife, and a helmet on his soul. His family alive
but indifferent, he makes his way back
to the ocean, back to the popcorn, back
to the pinball machines, wants to see
the boss who had treated him well. "Hey
Bob! It's me, George!" Kindness is magnetic
but the past is a loose adhesive and rarely
is employment a glue. "How nice to see
you, George!" He hangs around for about
an hour, then slinks back to the deserted
battlefield he has had tattooed on his future.

NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS

It was the 70s. My students carried
guns. My colleagues died of AIDS.
My married neighbors were cineastes.
I walked the rent-controlled boulevards
of Sunnyside and watched the glib sun
set over loquacious Manhattan. Every day's
evaporated apogee had its inky epitaph.
We exist only insofar as we are remembered.
Remember going to Carroll Gardens for those
fake IDs? Remember the urine urn in LeFrak
City? Remember the coconut kishke from
Zabar's? Remember the Ely Avenue Cleaver?
Under the bridges of Kew Gardens Hills
the invented truth still has street value.

FOUR NOBLE LIES

When Carlotta left me I cried
into my soup. I shriveled into
harsh mathematics. A decade
later I was living on Iowa Street
with Karen. She had goldfish and
good taste. I loved her for her fleshy
neck. We drank sinewy Dos Equis
and played Mahjong. In March
I developed that cruel facial tic.
That precipitated the divorce.
At the thought of losing her
my heart contracted into a span.
But I knew one day I'd replace her
with a brutally neutered cat.

THE PROUD ACCOUNTING

You were the first to be found
head down in the sewage
of what we do for a living
but time will purify that.
Your wife is losing weight
in the hope that grief will
make her body attractive
and it will. She is radiantly
unhappy without you
but worst off is your daughter
wrapped in the newspaper
that announced your death.
She walks alone in black high heels
down the corridor of sterile engagement.

UNCLE MOSCOW

He asked me to bury him in Vegas.
Instead, I had him cremated in Trenton.
But I did hang his dog tags on a high bough
of an alder tree outside the Frontier Hotel.
The last time I saw him was in an assisted-
living facility in Pennsauken. He stuck out
a wine dark tongue and punched me
in the chest. Poor one-eyed Uncle
Moscow—a fruit fly flew into his eyeball
and stuck there—then two hitchhikers
in his backseat hit him on the head
with a ball-peen hammer and stole his car.
He had a mind like a whorehouse martini, but
that doesn't negate the leverage of a man's heart.

RAW SALT

I poured bleach on the bloody moon
and turned it scalding white. Then I
wrote my autobiography on it in ash.
When the bill came due, I joined the
cowboys who navigate by fear. They
locked me in a cabin inhabited by
moles. I escaped through the mirror
and landed in a lake. I baked for weeks
in seaweed and lost a lot of flesh.
Hittites picked the barnacles off me
and packed me in raw salt. I healed
in time to see the airmen welcomed home.
A tall barker was hawking condo lots.
It was Gatlinburg in mid July.

GABRIELLE IN ARREARS

It's 10:46 in Newark on New Year's Eve.

You're rushing to the Ramada ballroom
for an evening of kisses, hors d'oeuvres,
and darkened drinks. Someone honks.

Unnerved, you swerve to the right, side-
swipe a Buick, slide back across the lane,
flip into a ditch. Doctor Causson warned you
more than once about the consequences of
being distracted. Well, it's too late to resuscitate
advice now. You should be calling 911, waving
at headlights, flagging down trucks, pulling
your bleeding husband from the car. Instead
you're just staring at your hands as if somehow
they were imperious tools capable of magic.

PICKING THE BARK OFF EXPERIENCE

As he gets into the oil-soaked tub
he recognizes the Jupiter Symphony
playing on the floor below.

Any minute now the waiter will
bring him his lobster omelet.

After breakfast he dresses and heads
for the blackjack tables. When he
wins a million dollars he will stop.

He remembers his mother's dead body,
the reunion strippers at the funeral.

Carrying a mimosa in a fluted glass
he fights his way through the lobby
packed with firefighters from Marietta.

His mind is full of anchors and Bar Harbor.

Copyright © 2011 Bill Yarrow
All rights reserved

These poems have previously appeared in other publications:

“Bogdan”
Negative Suck

“Love and How It Gets That Way”
And
“Gabrielle in Arrears”
Ramshackle Review

“George”
BLIP

“Four Noble Lies”
Right Hand Pointing

“The Proud Accounting”
LITSNACK

“Uncle Moscow”
Everyday Genius

“Raw Salt”
new aesthetic

Cover design and artwork by Matthew S. Barton
Cover photograph ©2011 Bill Yarrow

First Edition 2011

ISBN 978-1-60584-282-7
With generous support of Exact Change Press

Printed in the United States of America
NAKED MANNEKIN

